

# Humble Hero

Retired Lt. Col.

Dick Cole was

Lt. Col. Jimmy

Doolittle's

co-pilot during

the World War II

raid on Tokyo.

But 60 years later

Colonel Cole

insists he only

had a "bit part"

in the raid.



by Staff Sgt. Phyllis Duff

**H**e still stands tall — his stride swift. His gapped-tooth smile hides a joke he's thinking of. His wit remains keen.

Yet, retired Lt. Col. Dick Cole is humble.

True heroes are the most humble sort. Despite the hundreds of stories told about the brave feat of the 80 Doolittle Raiders, veterans like Colonel Cole claim they only had a "bit part." They were members of a team, and Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle was their "captain."

Colonel Cole was co-pilot of plane No. 1 — Colonel Doolittle's B-25 Mitchell medium bomber that led 16 crews to Tokyo. The planes took off from the Navy carrier USS Hornet 800 miles off Japan's coast. It was the first attack of Japan in World War II. The April 18, 1942, attack inspired America and produced 80 heroes.

## A flying fate

Born and raised in Dayton, Ohio — the birthplace of aviation — Colonel Cole was born to fly. Every chance he got, he'd bicycle to McCook Field and sit on the levee of the Miami River to "watch what was going on" at the Army Air Corps' first airplane test base.

As a paper boy he delivered the news to young lieutenant pilots. He learned about Colonel Doolittle and all the legends who helped form the Army Air Corps. He kept a scrap book of flying feats. The young Cole was a member of the Airplane Model League of America, crafting rubber band-powered planes out of balsa wood and paper.

"I don't know, maybe being by McCook Field and in the model airplane club — it turned out that the only thing I ever wanted to do was fly Army Air Corps airplanes," Colonel Cole said.

After finishing high school during the Great Depression, he worked on a farm making \$75 a month, plus room and board. In three years, he'd saved the money to begin college. His junior year at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, he began civilian pilot training while working as an apprentice machinist at Leer Aviation. Mr. Leer visited the plant each day.

"When Mr. Leer found out I was taking flying lessons, he let me take time off without losing any part of my big salary."

He took flying lessons during the day and at night drove to Springfield in his little Model-A Ford for ground school.

Colonel Cole recalled the day his instructor said, "OK, I'm going to turn you loose today, you're going to go and make three or four landings."

This was a moment he had dreamed of.



*Retired Lt. Col. Dick Cole sits in his Comfort, Texas, home with a statue of his friend and aircraft commander Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle. Colonel Cole, now 90 years old, is one of only 16 of the original Doolittle Raiders alive today.*



“If you could have had a look-see into each individual that went to flying school, the day they soloed was the best day ever,” Colonel Cole said. “There was lots of jubilation you couldn’t stop talking about. It was a major stepping stone.”

The call

Colonel Cole signed up to fly with both the Navy and the Army, but the Army Air Corps’ answer came first. After training, his first assignment was flying the B-25 Mitchell with the 17th Bombardment Group in Pendleton, Ore. After Pearl Harbor, the group flew anti-submarine patrols off the Pacific Northwest coast.

Early in 1942, the “call came out,” he said. The Army needed volunteers for a secret mission.

Within days, the volunteers headed to Eglin Field, Fla., to get carrier-qualified and trained in low-level navigation and bombing. Training the young pilots, navigators and bombardiers was none other than Colonel Cole’s hero — Colonel Doolittle. After four months the Mitchell crews were ready.

But just before the mission, the leader of Colonel Cole’s crew became ill. So his crew was reassigned to the only aircraft commander available.

“I don’t have any space except with the ‘old man,’ who will be coming in this afternoon,” the operations officer said. “I’ll crew you up with him.”

That old man turned out to be Colonel Doolittle. On the Hornet, the planes — engines rumbling — waited their turn to fly off the 500-foot deck. Rupturing waves crashed against the side of the 20,000-ton vessel. Seventy-nine men led by Colonel Doolittle would have to fly to the shores of Japan — 400 miles farther than planned after being spotted by enemy boats.

The crews were flying so low they could see sharks. “I checked my Mae West often,” Colonel Cole said. The flotation vest named because “it makes everyone look buxom in the chest,” like the 1930s movie star of the same name. The vest “had some kind of vial that once you got in the water becomes a shark repellent — I wanted to make sure just where those things were and how to operate it.”

It was noon as the planes reached Japan. Over Tokyo Bay, the planes shot to 1,500 feet and then — “bombs away!” After dropping their bombs, the crews flew about 75 miles south of Japan and turned right toward China. Desperately low on fuel all the crewmembers knew they might have to bail out. Colonel Doolittle was the only one in the crew to have done that before.

“Bailing out was the better alternative,” Colonel Cole said smiling.

A tail wind helped the planes gain almost 200 miles. Colonel Cole admits he was scared. But he had no better option. Flying in stormy darkness, Colonel Doolittle cut the switches.

“The only thing I remember, really, was that it was all nice and quiet except for the thunder and lightning and the rain. It was peaceful, just kind of hanging in space.”

Colonel Doolittle shouted, “Everybody out,” and the crew bailed out over China.

Recovery

“I pulled the rip cord so hard I gave myself a black eye,” the colonel said chuckling. “Fortunately my chute drifted over a pine tree and I ended up about 12 feet off the ground. I felt relieved because I thought for sure I was going to break my legs since I couldn’t see.”

He gathered in his chute and made a hammock to sit on. Staying awake all night as rain and winds raged on, he wondered where and how everyone else was. He thought about his family. But he never thought anything bad would happen to him.

“I guess you could say maybe I’m an eternal optimist,” he said.

The next morning, Colonel Cole climbed down the tree. With compass in hand, he headed west, walking all day. By dusk, he had only run into a few Chinese.

“They told us on the ship if you run into Japanese that they were very grim looking. If you run into the Chinese — they smile,” he said. At Chu Chow, “the kid I ran into looked happy.”

He led the colonel to an abandoned building. Inside was a table with a sketch of a plane and five parachutes. Colonel Doolittle had drawn them.

Once the crew was recovered they spent the next 10 days trekking through the Chinese countryside on foot, seeing rickshaws, ponies and river boats. Colonel Doolittle would not leave until he knew about every crew. One plane diverted to Russia where the Russians captured the crew. They escaped to Iran 14 months later. The Chinese rescued one badly wounded crew. Crews from the No. 6 and No. 16 aircraft ditched into the sea just off Japan. Two crewmembers drowned. The eight survivors fell into enemy hands and three were later executed by Japanese officers.

The raid caused little damage. But it proved to the Japanese people that the island was not the safe haven their leaders had promised. The bombing caused the Japanese to pull back forces from around Australia and India.

“They thought we were going to start bombing them daily,” the colonel said. “But we had no intentions — we didn’t have the resources to do it.”

courtesy photo



**Crew No. 1 (Plane #40-2344, target Tokyo)** 34th Bombardment Squadron, (front left to right) Lt. Col. James Doolittle, pilot; Lt. Dick Cole, co-pilot; Lt. Henry Potter,

navigator; Staff Sgt. Fred Braemer, bombardier; Staff Sgt. Paul Leonard, flight engineer/gunner.

After the raid, Colonel Cole stayed in China and India flying cargo planes. As a pilot with the 1st Air Commando Group, he flew 200 Soldiers “deep inside the enemy’s guts,” during Opera-

tion Thursday — the first allied all-aerial invasion.

Settling down

By 1943, Colonel Cole was back stateside. That year he met his wife, Martha, a “stowaway” his co-pilot found on a flight from Tulsa, Okla. They married three weeks later, raised five children and traveled the world. The colonel retired at George Air Force Base, Calif., 26 years after the Tokyo Raid, and bought an orange grove.

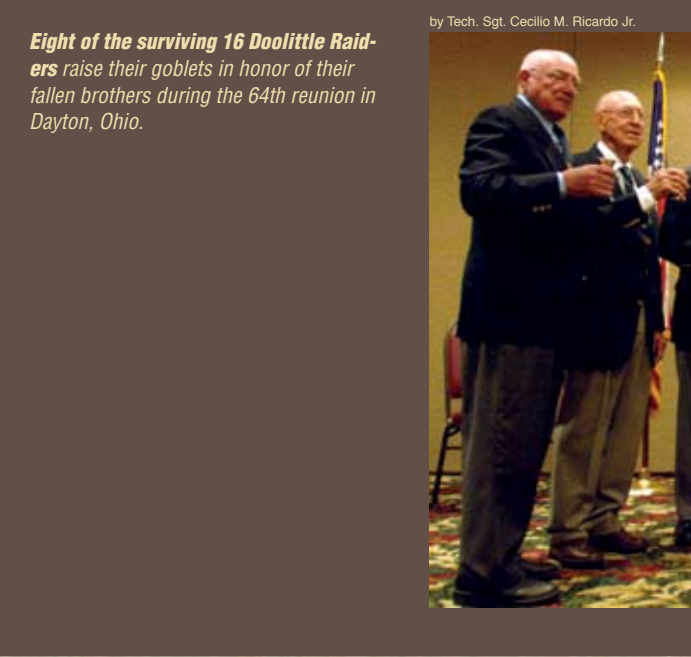
“It was big enough to have a light airplane strip on it,” he said. “But five children and an airplane take a little bit of money, so the flying part had to say ‘bye-bye.’”

Twelve years later, the Coles moved to San Antonio and eventually settled in Comfort, Texas — population 2,500.

Three years ago, Martha, his wife of 60 years, passed away. Although lonely without her, the colonel keeps going. Sometimes he’ll do a speaking engagement — reflecting on his military adventures. But he mostly tends his farm and takes care of the geese, ducks, chickens, donkeys, a black cat and an emu that keep him company. He cooks all his meals. This past winter he chopped and stacked nearly five cords of wood. His next project — fix the axle on a stranded tractor.

The 90-year-old command pilot clocked more than 5,000 hours in 30 different airplanes. He flew 250 combat missions and earned three Distinguished Flying Crosses. And he took part in one of the most historic moments of World War II. He is a hero. But he’s still humble.

“An ordinary fella” who was “just doing” what he volunteered to do, he said. 🦋



**Eight of the surviving 16 Doolittle Raiders** raise their goblets in honor of their fallen brothers during the 64th reunion in Dayton, Ohio.

by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio M. Ricardo Jr.

Honoring the Fallen

The Doolittle Raiders have held numerous reunions since the Tokyo Raid in 1942. Since 1959, these reunions have included a solemn ceremony to honor the significance of the raid. That year, the city of Tucson, Ariz., presented the group with a set of silver goblets, each bearing the name of one of the 80 men. When a Raider dies, his goblet is turned upside down.

The ceremony, normally held in private, was opened to the media this year to honor the significance of the historical Raid.

With eight of the 16 remaining Raiders present, retired Lt. Col. Dick Cole, 90, presided over their honored roll call and toasted retired Lt. Col. Horrace Crouch, the Raider who passed away since their last meeting.

“We do this to pay homage to the people we love and lost,” Colonel Cole said.

When there are but two Raiders left, the two men will open a bottle of cognac vintage 1896 — the year Doolittle was born — and once again toast departed comrades.